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A look on the bright side of an environmentally-friendly life

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chapter 6

General discussion



As U.S. president Barack Obama stated in his speech at the 2014 Climate Summit “We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it” (original quote by Governor Jay Inslee). In order to effectively “do something” about climate change, it is crucial that individuals change their behavior to reduce their environmental impact (Chiras, 2011; IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), 2007). Unfortunately, acting environmentally-friendly is often implied to mean sacrificing personal well-being, since this type of behavior can involve some degree of effort and discomfort (De Young, 1990-1991). If this negative view has merit it may thus be difficult to motivate people to engage in environmentally-friendly action.

In the current dissertation we wondered whether engaging in environmentally-friendly behavior indeed means one has to sacrifice well-being and feel bad. We argued that viewing environmentally-friendly behavior solely as a sacrifice overlooks that it can also be perceived as meaningful behavior. Research shows that how comfortable engaging in the a specific action is, is not the only factor that determines whether people feel good or bad about their behavior; behavior may also feel good when it is perceived as a virtuous act (Anik, Aknin, Norton, Dunn, & Quoidbach, 2013; Grant & Sonnentag, 2010; Meier & Stutzer, 2008; Rudd, Aaker, & Norton, 2014). Opposite to the negative view above, we therefore propose that acting environmentally-friendly may actually contribute to personal well-being. The studies reported in this dissertation examine whether and why this may be the case.

Summary of the main findings

Do people have a positive emotional association with environmentally-friendly behavior itself?

Research shows that environmentally-friendliness and well-being can indeed be related (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Helliwell et al., 2012; Kasser & Sheldon, 2002; Welsch & Kühling, 2011; Xiao & Li, 2011). Correlational studies for instance show that consuming more environmentally-friendly is linked to greater personal well-being (Brown & Kasser, 2005), higher overall life-satisfaction (Xiao & Li, 2011), and more happiness (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002). Different explanations have been provided for this finding. Usually, however, these explanations do not focus on characteristics of environmentally-friendly behavior itself, but rather point to factors external to the behavior. Some suggest that the things that actually make us happy, like social relationships and personal growth, happen to be sustainable at the same time (Beavan, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; T. Jackson, 2005; Kasser, 2009). Others propose that individual characteristics, such as being mindful, can both lead to environmentally-friendly behavior and increased well-being (Brown & Kasser, 2005).

In the current dissertation we wondered whether the relationship between environmentally-friendly behavior and well-being can indeed only be explained by factors external to this behavior. Could characteristics of environmentally-friendly behavior *itself* not make people feel good as well?

To provide a theoretical answer to why environmentally-friendly behavior itself could contribute to or detract from well-being, we distinguished between the hedonic (i.e. pleasure) and the eudaimonic (i.e. meaning) route towards well-being in Chapter 2. We argued that pleasure and meaning may be linked to environmentally-friendly behavior in differing degrees. Pleasure or comfort, on the one hand, may only be associated with specific environmentally-friendly behaviors. While cycling on a warm spring day for instance may be evaluated as very comfortable, taking a cold shower in winter is most probably not. In fact, it may be the latter group of environmentally-friendly behaviors that leads people to think acting environmentally-friendly threatens well-being. Meaning, on the other hand, is at the core of environmentally-friendly behavior. As acting environmentally-friendly can benefit the quality of nature and the well-being of other people, it can be seen as moral and thereby meaningful behavior (Heberlein, 1972; Leopold, 1949; Thøgersen, 1996). So, while it is other characteristics of specific environmentally-friendly behavior that bring comfort or discomfort, it may be its positive consequences for the environment as such that bring meaning.

In the empirical chapters of this dissertation (Chapters 3, 4 and 5), we studied the extent to which environmentally-friendly behavior can increase well-being by examining the positive emotions that this type of behavior elicits. In Chapter 2, we distinguished between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being as two distinct types of outcomes. Therefore, we set out to examine the influence of environmentally-friendly behavior on two distinct types of positive emotions: hedonic emotions (fleeting positive emotions such as pleasure) and eudaimonic emotions (deeper positive emotions such as feeling meaningful). Based on our reasoning we expected that more environmentally-friendly behavior would elicit especially more eudaimonic emotions, while hedonic emotions were not expected to be consistently linked to the environmentally-friendliness of behavior: it was expected to be other characteristics of environmentally-friendly behavior and not its environmental consequences that make it pleasant or unpleasant. In the empirical chapters of this dissertation, however, we found repeatedly that environmentally-friendly behavior elicited both positive eudaimonic and positive hedonic emotions, suggesting such behavior can elicit a broad range of positive feelings. We therefore came to see meaning as a reason why behavior elicits positive emotions in general, and consequently tested whether the meaning people associate with environmentally-friendly behavior could explain why engagement elicits its positive emotions in the empirical chapters. We will further discuss this reasoning under the heading of theoretical implications.

Chapter 3 examined whether environmentally-friendly behavior itself is associated with positive emotions. In Study 3.1 we compared the explicit association people have with behavior that can benefit the environment to the association they have with behavior that can harm the environment. In a scenario study we systematically varied whether the behaviors participants evaluated were environmentally-friendly or environmentally-unfriendly (e.g., washing clothes at a low temperature versus washing clothes at a high temperature; between subjects). We expected that environmentally-friendly behaviors would be seen as more meaningful than environmentally-unfriendly behaviors, and thus that people would anticipate to feel more positive and less negative emotions after engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior, compared to after engagement in its environmentally-unfriendly counterparts. Our results supported this expectation, providing a first indication that people may have a positive association with environmentally-friendly behavior itself. In Study 3.2 we compared the implicit association people have with environmentally-friendly versus neutral words. This way we could establish that the findings in Study 3.1 reflect a positive association with environmentally-friendly behavior, rather than a negative association with environmentally-unfriendly behavior. Furthermore, as people are motivated to be seen as moral (Batson et al., 1999) it may be that the positive association people reported in Study 3.1 was caused by social desirability concerns. To reduce the likelihood of social desirability answering we use an Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998) in Study 3.2. The results showed that people also implicitly associate environmentally-friendly words more strongly with positive than with negative emotions compared to neutral words, again supporting a positive emotional association with environmentally-friendly behavior itself is present.

Can the meaning associated with this behavior explain why acting environmentally-friendly feels good?

Chapter 3 confirmed that environmentally-friendly behavior can be associated with positive emotions. Our second aim was to test whether the meaning associated with environmentally-friendly behavior can explain why this link exists. If meaning indeed plays an important role in explaining this relationship, behavior that is perceived to be more meaningful should also elicit more positive emotions.

We tested this reasoning in two different ways. First, we examined the role of meaning by testing its moderating influence on the relationship between environmentally-friendly behavior and positive emotions. Would a positive emotional association with environmentally-friendly behavior be stronger under conditions where the meaning of this behavior was assumed to be higher? Study 3.1 tested several of these conditions, including perceived characteristics of the behavior itself and individual characteristics that may affect how personally meaningful environmentally-friendly behavior is perceived to be. One relevant characteristic of behavior that is likely to affect its

meaning is how environmentally-friendly and thus moral the behavior is perceived to be. As we theorized above, acting environmentally-friendly can be seen as meaningful behavior because of its moral nature: it contributes to the quality of nature and the environment, and the well-being of other people now and in the future. The extent to which behavior is perceived to be environmentally-friendly, therefore, may affect the meaning attributed to this behavior, thereby influencing how good engagement feels. As expected, Study 3.1. indeed showed that people had a stronger positive emotional association with environmentally-friendly (versus environmentally-unfriendly) behaviors when they saw the behaviors included in the study as being more environmentally-friendly.

Furthermore, we examined two relevant individual characteristics that are likely to affect the *personal* meaning people attach to environmentally-friendly behavior: how much people value the environment, and the extent to which they feel morally obliged to engage in environmentally-friendly behavior. As expected, Study 3.1 indeed showed that people had a stronger positive emotional association with environmentally-friendly behavior when they valued the environment more strongly and when they felt more morally obliged to engage in environmentally-friendly behavior. Together, these results suggest that a positive emotional association with environmentally-friendly behavior is stronger in conditions under which the meaning of this behavior was assumed to be higher, that is, when people more strongly care about nature and the environment, and when the behavior is seen as more environmentally-friendly.

Second, we examined the role of meaning by testing its mediating influence on the relationship between environmentally-friendly behavior and positive emotions. Could meaning explain why a positive emotional association with environmentally-friendly behavior would exist? In Chapter 4, we tested our reasoning by explicitly measuring whether behavior that is perceived to be more environmentally-friendly is indeed perceived to be more meaningful, and whether the meaning attributed to this behavior in turn influences the emotions elicited by acting accordingly. As expected, two scenario and one field study showed that the more people perceived behavior to be environmentally-friendly, the more meaningful they deemed this behavior to be. In turn, the more meaningful people deemed behavior to be, the better they expected to feel (Study 4.1 and 4.2) and actually felt (Study 4.3) about engaging in this behavior.

Together these results suggest that the meaning associated with environmentally-friendly behavior can serve as an important explanation for why people feel good about acting this way. We will further discuss this finding under theoretical implications.

Can the self-image behavior elicits explain why acting environmentally-friendly feels good?

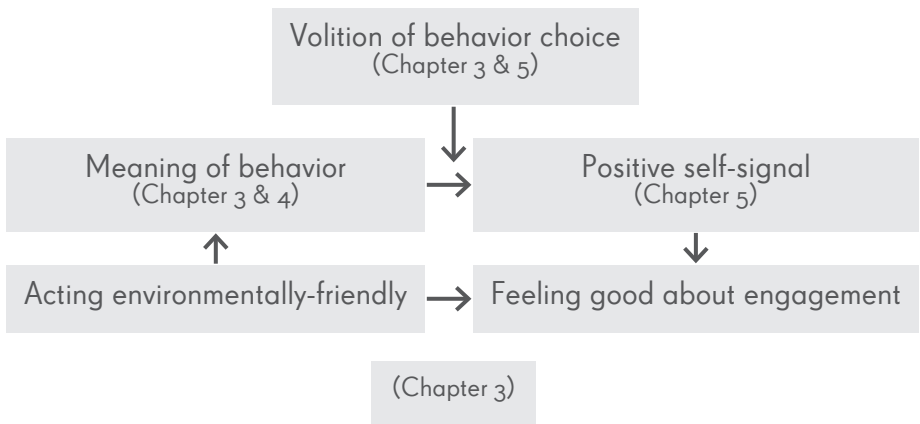
If meaning plays a role in explaining why acting environmentally-friendly feels good, the next question that arises is what leads meaning to have this effect. We theorized in Chapter 2 that engagement in meaningful behavior could elicit positive emotions because this behavior can *signal something positive about who you are*. One of the pillars on which people base their self-image, is their own actions (Bem, 1967; Bem, 1972). How meaningful your behavior is may thereby affect how positive your self-image is (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Dunning, 2007; Sachdeva et al., 2009). If environmentally-friendly behavior is perceived to be meaningful behavior, acting this way may thus boost your self-image, thereby eliciting positive emotions.

Chapter 3 provided a first examination of whether a positive self-signal can explain why doing something meaningful, in this case acting environmentally-friendly, can feel good. We argued that *making the choice* to engage in certain behavior rather than acting out of situational constraints may particularly reveal something about who you are – not only to others, but also to yourself (Bodner & Prelec, 2003). We base our reasoning on Aristotle, who claimed virtuous behavior entails someone doing moral things for the right reasons—the right reasons being that the person is deliberately choosing to act morally rather than doing so out of external temptation or coercion, or out of ignorance (Ryan et al., 2008). This suggests that acting in a meaningful way out of one's own volition may send a stronger positive self-signal and therefore elicit stronger positive emotions than acting this way out of external pressure. Study 3.1 showed that the positive emotional association with environmentally-friendly behavior was indeed stronger when engagement was driven by one's own volition rather than by the situation. This result suggests that the more this behavior reveals something about who you are, the more positive the emotional association with environmentally-friendly behavior is.

In Chapter 5, we further tested our reasoning by explicitly measuring whether acting environmentally-friendly influences how people see themselves and elicits a positive self-image. In Study 5.1 we examined whether engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior reflects on how people see themselves. Our results revealed that environmentally-friendly behavior indeed impacts people's self-image: the more environmentally-friendly products supermarket customers just bought, the more they saw themselves as an environmentally-friendly person. In turn, the more environmentally-friendly their self-image was, the better participants felt about their purchases. Building on this finding, Study 5.2 tested whether environmentally-friendly behavior can actually boost one's self-image as well. Here we showed that participants who thought about environmentally-friendly behaviors they engaged in out of their

own volition saw themselves in a more positive light than participants who thought about environmentally-friendly behaviors they engaged in out of situational constraints. Again, as expected, it was this positive self-image that in turn led people to anticipate feeling better about their behavior. Together these results suggest that acting environmentally-friendly can reflect on who you are and boost your self-image, thereby making environmentally-friendly behavior feel good to engage in.

Figure 1
Theoretical
model
studied in this
dissertation



Theoretical implications

Whether and why environmentally-friendly behavior is a source of well-being

The findings of our empirical chapters have several theoretical implications. Most importantly, our findings add new insights to the literature studying the link between environmentally-friendly behavior and well-being. The main contribution of this dissertation is that it indicates environmentally-friendly behavior *itself* may be a source of well-being, as acting environmentally-friendly can be seen as meaningful behavior and boost one's self-image.

Until now, the link between environmentally-friendly behavior and well-being was typically explained as having an external cause. Instead of environmentally-friendly behavior being the source of well-being, scholars proposed a third variable could explain environmentally-friendly action and increased well-being at the same time (Beavan, 2009; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; T. Jackson, 2005; Kasser, 2009). We, however, theorized it may actually be environmentally-friendly behavior itself that makes people feel good. As acting environmentally-friendly can have positive consequences for the quality of nature and the well-being of other people, this behavior can be seen as moral behavior (Heberlein, 1972; Leopold, 1949; Thøgersen, 1996). Perceiving behavior to be beneficial for the environment, therefore, may make such behavior moral and thereby meaningful to engage in, leading acting this way to feel good as well.

We found clear support for this reasoning, as our studies consistently showed that the meaning people associate with this type of behavior is an important reason why acting environmentally-friendly may bring well-being. The more environmentally-friendly and thereby meaningful the behavior itself is perceived to be, and the more personal meaning people attach to environmentally-friendly behavior, the better people (expected to) feel about acting this way. Furthermore, our studies suggest that engagement in meaningful behavior feels good because of its effect on one's self-image. The more environmentally-friendly behavior is perceived to be, the more acting accordingly leads you to see yourself in an environmentally-friendly and positive light, thereby eliciting positive emotions.

Together our findings suggest that not only a third variable can explain why environmentally-friendly action and well-being are linked; environmentally-friendly behavior *itself* may be a source of well-being as well. By demonstrating the important role meaning plays, we add a novel and more direct explanation for why environmentally-friendly behavior and well-being can go together.

Meaning and pleasure may be related

Although we originally set out to examine the influence of environmentally-friendly behavior on two distinct types of positive emotions, we gradually came to see meaning as a reason why behavior elicits a broad range of positive emotions. Over all studies, we found that environmentally-friendly behavior did not only elicit positive eudaimonic emotions, but may give rise to positive hedonic emotions as well. This implies that its environmental consequences not only make environmentally-friendly behavior feel good in a eudaimonic sense, but they can also make this behavior feel good in a hedonic sense. This dissertation thus provides further evidence that meaning and pleasure may sometimes be difficult to separate. As some argue, the meaning people attribute to behavior may even be a *source* of pleasure and comfort (see Andreoni, 1989; Andreoni, 1990; Taufik et al., 2015). Future research should study this possible relationship in more detail.

A theoretical question that remains is whether meaning as a factor that affects wellbeing can actually be distinguished from well-being itself. Although we use measures of meaning to explain *why* environmentally-friendly behavior elicits a good feeling, some might argue that meaning *is* a good feeling, and thereby a component (not an antecedent) of well-being. Longitudinal research could partly solve this discussion by finding out whether acting in a meaningful way now is one of the ways to bring well-being later on (meaning as antecedent of well-being), versus whether without experiencing a sense of meaning now, people can never attain well-being later on (meaning as component of well-being). As the nature of the relationship between meaning and well-being is for a large part a theoretical question, however, longitudinal data could

never provide a definite answer. If one reasons experiencing meaning is a key factor of being well, finding out that people can attain well-being without experiencing meaning would not prove meaning is an antecedent (not a component) of well-being; such a finding would only show that we have been using the wrong measures of well-being all along.

Practical implications

Not only do the findings of our empirical chapters lead to new theoretical insights, they also have several practical implications. As illustrated by the quote “The American way of life is not up for negotiations” by former U.S. president George H.W. Bush prior to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, many policy makers still believe that engaging in environmentally friendly behavior requires sacrificing personal well-being. Building on prior literature, our results however show that this belief may be erroneous: our participants rather associated environmentally-friendly behavior with positive emotions. The findings in this dissertation show that people see environmentally-friendly behavior as meaningful behavior exactly because of its positive consequences for the environment, and thereby (expect to) feel good about acting accordingly. If governments’ long-term goal is to improve environmental quality and individual well-being at the same time, decreasing or downplaying discomfort should thus not be the sole focus when promoting environmentally-friendly behavior (L. Evans et al., 2013; Thøgersen, 2013). Focusing on those personal and behavioral aspects that make environmentally-friendly behavior more meaningful to engage in could provide to be a fruitful alternative direction.

Increase the clarity of behavior’s meaning

We found that people come to see their own actions as more meaningful when those actions are perceived to be better for the environment. Since environmental impact depends on multiple dimensions, however, it is not always clear how environmentally-friendly specific behaviors are. For instance, although buying products that are produced locally is an often used strategy to reduce one’s environmental impact, it is not always true that foreign produce is more environmentally harmful than local produce (Milieu Centraal, November, 2012). Especially for laypeople, it may therefore be difficult to pinpoint which behavior harms the environment the least. Not knowing how environmentally-friendly one’s behavior is may, according to this thesis, take away from the meaning people could associate with this behavior, and thereby from the good feeling engaging in this behavior brings. Enhancing awareness of the positive impact of one’s behavior may therefore be an important way to optimize how people feel about acting this way (Aknin et al., 2013). Clear and trustworthy

communication may help to increase awareness of the environmental impact of relevant behaviors, leading people to feel good about engaging in those behaviors that benefit the environment.

Increase the strength of the positive self-signal behavior sends

As our findings suggest, how behavior reflects on you personally also affects how you feel about acting accordingly. Increasing the extent to which positive behavior, such as acting environmentally-friendly, reflects on you may boost your self-image and thereby increase the well-being this behavior brings. As our studies show, volition of choice may be a factor influencing how strongly behavior reflects on its actor. Participants who thought about environmentally-friendly actions they engaged in out of their own volition saw themselves in a more positive light than participants who thought about actions they engaged in out of situational constraints. *Making the choice* to act environmentally-friendly, therefore, seems to be an important condition for enhancing how good people feel about this action. That does not necessarily entail, however, that all governmental interventions coercing people to act environmentally-friendly are abolished in order for people to feel good about themselves and their behavior. Rather, in addition to considering whether the policy is effective in promoting the target behavior, policy makers should also take into account whether it allows people to attribute the choice for doing the target behavior to their own volition.

An interesting case in this respect is the use of “nudges”, an often discussed policy instrument nowadays. A nudge refers to “any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives” (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008, p. 6). Examples of this type of intervention in the environmental domain would be to place environmentally-friendly products on eye level in a supermarket, or to make a “green” behavior the default option (Ebeling & Lotz, 2015). Such nudges are believed to leave individuals’ sense of autonomy intact. Consequently, when nudged to act environmentally-friendly, people may not see the nudge but rather their own volition as the reason for their action, allowing them to feel good about acting this way.

However, one can wonder whether people indeed necessarily feel in charge of their decision to engage in certain behavior when motivated to do so by a nudge. Hansen and Jespersen (Hansen & Jespersen, 2013) argue that there are two type of nudges: those that motivate engaging in behavior by influencing reflective thinking and those that motivate engaging in behavior by influencing automatic thinking. An example of the first type of nudge would be to place environmentally-friendly products on eye level, as mentioned above. In this intervention conscious attention is drawn to environmentally-friendly products and people then *choose* to purchase them. This indeed seems to fit the image of nudges as ways to motivate action without restricting autonomy – thereby allowing people to feel their behavior was volitional.

An example of the second type of nudge would be to use smaller plates to discourage overconsumption (Van Ittersum & Wansink, 2012). In this case, the use of smaller plates makes people eat less *without them consciously being aware of this*. With this type of nudge people may not know they eat smaller portions, let alone perceive this as a choice they made themselves. If people act environmentally-friendly based on the second type of nudge, the good feeling this behavior could have elicited may therefore be lost. Not only does the good behavior say little about who they are, actors may not even be aware of the fact they are doing something environmentally-friendly and thus meaningful. Explicitly letting people know that they chose to act environmentally-friendly *after the fact* may be helpful to solve these problems, and increase both the awareness and the self-signaling effect of behaviors nudged in this way.

Advertise environmentally-friendly behavior as behavior that can make you feel good?

A practical implication that might be tempting to draw from the current dissertation is that one could promote environmentally-friendly action by referring to its positive effects on personal well-being. The first commercials using this link already exist: a large Dutch supermarket chain for instance recently promoted their organic produce with the slogan “The good feeling of organic”. However, there is a practical consideration that might speak against this approach. It is namely unclear whether people would still feel good about their meaningful and virtuous behavior if they engage in it *with the explicit and sole purpose to feel good*. As we already mention above, Aristotle’s view on meaning entails someone doing virtuous things for the right reasons—the right reasons being that the person is deliberately choosing to act this way and is not doing so out of external temptation or coercion, or out of ignorance (Ryan et al., 2008). Engaging in virtuous behavior *solely because* this behavior is expected to make you feel good, and not because it is the right thing to do, may therefore not be very meaningful in Aristotle’s eyes.

Whether and when striving towards becoming happier actually contributes to well-being, is debated in the current literature. Some preliminary studies show that telling people good behavior makes you feel better does not necessarily detract from the behaviors’ actual effect on how good they feel (Anik, Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009). Believing certain behavior can contribute to your well-being may actually be part and parcel of what leads this behavior to have an effect on well-being (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011). Others, however, argue that true happiness cannot be found by focusing on getting it. According to this line of reasoning, happiness is always a byproduct of personal devotion to something larger than ourselves and being fully involved in the life we live (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). Future research is necessary to study the effectiveness of directly striving towards happiness in general. Yet, results of the current dissertation suggests that acting environmentally-friendly

to feel good, and not to do something meaningful, may not have the desired effect. As we reason in Chapter 2 and show in Chapters 3 and 4, the meaning people associate with the behavior is an important aspect of why engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior feels good. In order for environmentally-friendly behavior to feel good, it should therefore be clear to people that this behavior is meaningful to do. When focusing on self-interest, such as how engagement would make you feel, the notion that this behavior is virtuous and meaningful may be pushed into the background. Ironically, this may even prevent the promised well-being from being elicited. By only focusing on the positive emotions you will feel when acting environmentally-friendly, the precise source of these positive emotions – the idea that you are doing something virtuous and meaningful – is namely missing.

Future research

The current dissertation focused on whether, why and under which circumstances environmentally-friendly behavior contributes to well-being. Our results highlight the importance of meaning in answering these questions, but they also raise new questions that need to be addressed in future research. Some of these questions were already discussed under the heading of theoretical and practical implications. In this section we focus on what we think are the two most important directions for future research.

Further exploration of the model studied in this dissertation

The findings in this dissertation suggest that environmentally-friendly behavior can elicit positive emotions. Furthermore, meaning and the positive self-signal environmentally-friendly behavior thereby sends, can together serve as an explanation for why engagement in this type of behavior can feel good (see Figure 1). The different chapters of this dissertation study and give support for separate parts of our theoretical model. The full model, however, has not been tested yet. Most importantly, while theoretically there is a clear link between the meaning associated with behavior and the positivity of the self-signal engagement in this behavior sends, we did not study this link explicitly in the current dissertation. Future research could therefore test whether it is indeed the meaning associated with behavior that makes acting this way reflect positively on who you are.

Follow-up research could further develop the model we propose in this dissertation as well. A first direction would be to further examine whether all environmentally-friendly behavior translates into perceived meaning and positive emotions, or whether these results depend on characteristics of the specific environmentally-friendly behavior under study. For instance, the behaviors we studied (e.g. recycling)

were probably not perceived to be very aggravating. We can therefore not determine whether the meaning people attribute to behavior always translates in positive emotions, or whether this relationship is only found when meaningful behavior is not too uncomfortable to engage in. An interesting question for future research would therefore be how the relationship in our model depend on characteristics of specific environmentally-friendly behavior – factors that are unrelated to the behaviors' impact on the environment itself.

A second direction would be to further examine what makes environmentally-friendly behavior (personally) meaningful. In the current thesis we mainly focus on aspects of the behavior itself that make it meaningful, following the reasoning that its positive consequences for the environment and future generations are a source of meaning for environmentally-friendly behavior. As we already suggest in Study 3.1, however, individual differences may also influence the extent to which environmentally-friendly behavior is *personally* meaningful. Testing the influence of various individual characteristics in a more systematic way, and studying other factors that make this behavior more meaningful for certain individuals could provide to be a fruitful deepening of our reasoning. Following our reasoning, an interesting additional factor to study would be the extent to which people believe climate change is real and human actions influence environmental conditions. If people do not believe there are environmental problems, or do not believe human actions affect the environment, they should also perceive environmentally-friendly behavior to have little positive consequences for nature or other people. For these people, engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior may therefore be less meaningful and elicit less positive feelings. As a first indication of this process, our results in Study 4.1 suggest that believing you can personally contribute to improving environmental quality by engaging in specific behavior indeed relates to seeing this behavior as more meaningful and feeling better about acting accordingly. Future research could study whether believing human action is necessary and effective in benefitting the environment in general influences the meaning and emotions elicited by environmentally-friendly behavior in a similar way.

A third direction would be to study alternative relationships between the factors in our model. The extent to which voluntary action influences other factors than just the relationship between meaning and a positive self-image would be of specific interest. For instance, an important stance in theoretical considerations about morality is that “decisions are classified as moral only when the person who makes them is perceived to be the responsible agent, that is, to have chosen the action knowingly and willingly when he could have done otherwise” (Heberlein, 1972, p. 81). Following this reasoning, behavior would only be moral and thus meaningful if engagement can be attributed to one's own volition. Besides influencing to what extent meaningful

behavior leads to a positive self-image, as we test in our current model, volitional or non-volitional engagement may thus also influence the meaning attributed to behavior itself. By testing such alternative relationships between the factors in our model, future research may gain new and promising insights.

What are the long-term effects of the good feeling environmentally-friendly behavior could elicit?

The current dissertation focused on whether, why and under which circumstances environmentally-friendly behavior makes people feel good. Another relevant question for future research is what happens afterwards: what are the long-term effects of feeling good by doing good for the environment? Do the positive emotions environmentally-friendly action elicits translate into long-term well-being for those who engage in these actions? And are there, besides the individual well-being benefits, also long-term societal benefits gained from the good feeling engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior can bring?

On the basis of the processes we studied in the current dissertation, we would expect environmentally-friendly behavior does not only elicit positive emotions, but also leads to long-term individual well-being benefits. As mentioned at the beginning of our introduction, various scholars have suggested and shown that environmentally-friendliness and well-being are linked (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Helliwell et al., 2012; Kasser & Sheldon, 2002; Welsch & Kühling, 2011; Xiao & Li, 2011). As these correlational studies suggest, long-term well-being and acting environmentally-friendly can thus go together. The main question to be answered, however, was *why* this relationship exists. In the current dissertation we show that the meaning people attribute to environmentally-friendly behavior may be what makes this type of behavior feel good right away. The meaning this type of behavior brings may therefore also be part of why acting environmentally-friendly is related to overall well-being. Future longitudinal research is necessary to test whether and how the meaning associated with current environmental actions translates into long-term well-being as well. As environmentally-friendly behavior is not the only type of behavior that can be perceived as meaningful, and meaningful behavior is not the only factor influencing long-term well-being, however, it may be challenging to disentangle these long-term effects.

To what extent the good feeling acting environmentally-friendly brings also translates into future virtuous behavior – thereby leading to long-term societal benefits – is debated in different lines of research. The first line of research, studying moral licensing, would suggest a good feeling would not necessarily initiate a chain of further good behaviors. As this literature argues, when the need to see yourself in a positive light is fulfilled by one good action, there is no immediate reason to engage in further good but costly behavior. Rather, engagement in moral behavior now can lead to less

moral behavior on a later occasion (Sachdeva et al., 2009). Especially if engagement in moral behavior involves doing something unpleasant, the desire to stay in a positive mood may hamper following moral behavior (Isen & Simmonds, 1978). Some studies even suggest that it is a positive mood itself that leads to immoral behavior, by providing the cognitive flexibility necessary to rationalize immorality (Vincent, Emich, & Goncalo, 2013). This line of research would therefore suggest that the positive well-being effect of engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior does not necessarily translate into long-term benefits for society, and may even damage it.

Opposite to this line of research, however, stand findings that support Bertrand Russell: “The good life, as I conceive it, is a happy life. I do not mean that if you are good you will be happy; I mean that if you are happy you will be good” (Russell, 1951). For instance, the affect heuristic (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2007; Smith et al., 1994) would suggest that the feelings people associate with behavior would guide their actions. If engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior feels good, people would thus be expected to act environmentally-friendly again on a later occasion, as their previous experience may lead them to anticipate they will feel good again. On a larger scale, the broaden-and-build model of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson, 1998) suggests that positive emotions broaden “people’s momentary thought-action repertoires”. More precisely, positive emotions allow people to become more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated and healthy over time – as some argue, opening the way for virtuous behavior (Kesebir & Diener, 2013). As research indeed shows, doing good does not only feel good, people who feel good are also more likely to engage in good behavior (Aknin et al., 2012; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Manucia, Baumann, & Cialdini, 1984). This line of reasoning would therefore suggest that the positive well-being effect of engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior do spark future virtuous behavior, thereby bringing long-term benefits for society. An important question to answer therefore is when such a virtuous cycle is put in motion. In other words, when will the good feeling virtuous behavior brings motivate people to behave virtuously again, and when will it motivate them to behave counter-virtuously? Future longitudinal research should provide an answer to these questions.

Conclusion

Engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior may sometimes be costly, uncomfortable and frustrating, thereby seen as sacrificing well-being. The current dissertation however shows there is also a different, more positive side to this type of behavior: environmentally-friendly may also enhance well-being. Since environmentally-friendly behavior can be seen as meaningful behavior, engagement may reflect positively on who you are – particularly when you act out of your own volition. Thereby, in as far as environmentally-friendly behavior is seen as meaningful behavior, acting accordingly can feel good as well.

In that sense, the effect of environmentally-friendly behavior on well-being may be compared to that of other behaviors that are not always pleasant, but can bring great meaning – for example, having a child. Having a child can be costly, uncomfortable and frustrating, and on top of that fill you with worries. On the other hand, parents always assure “you also gain a lot in return”. The enjoyable moments and the meaning connecting to something/someone other than yourself brings can feel great (Haidt, 2006; Leary, 2004; Wayment & Bauer, 2008), even though having children overall may have a slightly negative effect on well-being (Alesina, Di Tella, & MacCulloch, 2004). As these cases illustrate, actions do not have to only be fun to be able to contribute to well-being. I am sure most parents would not want to miss out on the positive experiences their children bring, even if that would mean higher overall well-being. Why should that be any different for environmentally-friendly behavior?

Nederlandse samenvatting

Het beschermen en verbeteren van de milieukwaliteit is een belangrijke doelstelling voor overheden in de nabije toekomst. Zoals bijvoorbeeld afgesproken in het klimaatakkoord in Parijs moet de opwarming van de aarde ruim onder de twee graden blijven ten opzicht van de temperatuur voor de industriële revolutie (European Commission, December 23, 2015). Ook het vergroten van het geluk van hun burgers heeft prioriteit voor veel overheden. Volgens het World Happiness Report wordt geluk steeds vaker gezien als een goede maatstaf voor sociale vooruitgang en daarmee een na te streven doel voor beleid. Een groeiend aantal overheden maakt dan ook gebruik van kennis over wat mensen gelukkig maakt bij het maken van beleid (Helliwell et al., 2012).

Het verbeteren van de milieukwaliteit en het vergroten van geluk lijken op het eerste gezicht twee verschillende en misschien zelfs tegenovergestelde doelen. Het doen van iets milieuvriendelijks kan namelijk duurder, moeilijker en oncomfortabeler zijn dan het laten van dit gedrag, en daarom afbreuk doen aan geluk. In het huidige proefschrift beargumenteren we echter dat deze doelen niet noodzakelijkerwijs conflicteren. Sterker nog, de studies uit dit proefschrift hebben tot doel om na te gaan of milieuvriendelijk handelen juist kan bijdragen aan persoonlijk geluk en zo ja, waarom dit het geval is.

Hoewel eerder onderzoek al laat zien dat milieuvriendelijk gedrag en geluk kunnen samengaan (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Kasser & Sheldon, 2002; Xiao & Li, 2011), is er nog maar weinig bekend over *waarom* en *onder welke omstandigheden* dit het geval is. Tot nu toe werd deze relatie vaak verklaard door te verwijzen naar externe factoren. Individuele verschillen, zoals hoe mindful iemand is, kunnen er bijvoorbeeld voor zorgen dat mensen zowel milieuvriendelijker handelen als gelukkiger zijn (Brown & Kasser, 2005). Daarnaast blijken activiteiten die tot geluk leiden, zoals persoonlijke groei of sociale relaties, ‘toevallig’ ook vaak duurzaam te zijn (T. Jackson, 2005; Kasser, 2009). In dit proefschrift vragen we ons af of alleen factoren buiten het gedrag zelf kunnen verklaren waarom milieuvriendelijk gedrag en geluk samengaan. Kan milieuvriendelijk gedrag *zelf* niet ook een bron van geluk zijn?

In Hoofdstuk 2 geven we een theoretisch antwoord op deze vraag en gaan in op waarom er een positieve relatie tussen milieuvriendelijk gedrag en geluk zou kunnen bestaan. Hier beargumenteren we dat het belangrijk is om een verschil te maken tussen geluk dat gebaseerd is op welbehagen (*hedonisme*) en geluk dat gebaseerd is op betekenis (*eudaimonia*). Alhoewel sommige milieuvriendelijke gedragingen erg comfortabel kunnen zijn, zoals een fietstochtje op een mooie lentedag, zijn andere milieuvriendelijke gedragingen juist oncomfortabel, zoals een koude douche in de winter. Dit suggereert dat geluk gebaseerd op welbehagen geen eenduidige relatie met milieuvriendelijkheid zal hebben; het is niet de milieuvriendelijke aard van het

gedrag zelf, maar andere kenmerken van milieuvriendelijk gedrag die voor welbehagen zorgen. Dit is echter anders voor geluk gebaseerd op betekenis. De betekenis die we toekennen aan milieuvriendelijk gedrag kan namelijk direct voortkomen uit het feit *dat* het gedrag goed is voor het milieu. Veel mensen geloven dat zij moreel verplicht zijn om de natuur te beschermen (Leiserowitz et al., 2005; Lorenzoni et al., 2007). Vanwege de positieve gevolgen die dit gedrag kan hebben voor het welzijn van andere mensen nu en in de toekomst wordt milieuvriendelijk gedrag gezien als moreel en daarmee betekenisvol gedrag (Feinberg & Willer, 2012; Thøgersen, 1996). Weten dat het goed is voor het milieu kan dus één van de factoren zijn die gedrag betekenisvol maakt. Geluk gebaseerd op het ervaren van betekenis lijkt daarom een eenduidige link met milieuvriendelijkheid te hebben; de milieuvriendelijke aard van het gedrag zelf kan voor betekenis zorgen.

Samenvatting van de belangrijkste resultaten

Hebben mensen een positieve associatie met milieuvriendelijk gedrag?

In de empirische hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift (Hoofdstuk 3, 4 en 5) onderzochten we de rol die betekenis speelt voor de relatie tussen milieuvriendelijk gedrag en geluk in meer detail. We keken specifiek of milieuvriendelijk gedrag *zelf* positieve emoties oproept, en of deze emoties inderdaad voortkwamen uit de betekenis die dit gedrag kan geven. In Hoofdstuk 3 verkenden we de emotionele associatie die mensen hebben met milieuvriendelijk gedrag. Studie 3.1 richtte zich op de expliciete emotionele associatie die mensen hebben met milieuvriendelijk gedrag. Een scenario studie liet zien dat mensen inderdaad verwachtten meer positieve en minder negatieve emoties te ervaren na het vertonen van milieuvriendelijk gedrag (bijvoorbeeld afval scheiden) dan na het vertonen van milieuonvriendelijk gedrag (bijvoorbeeld alle typen afval in één container gooien). In Studie 3.2 bouwden we voort op deze bevindingen en keken naar de impliciete associatie die mensen hebben met milieuvriendelijk gedrag. Uit een Impliciete Associatie Test (Greenwald et al., 1998) bleek dat positieve en milieuvriendelijke woorden ook onbewust aan elkaar gelinkt worden. Er lijkt dus inderdaad een positieve emotionele associatie met milieuvriendelijk gedrag te bestaan, die niet verklaard lijkt te worden door sociaal wenselijk antwoordgedrag.

Kan de betekenis die milieuvriendelijk gedrag heeft verklaren waarom het doen van dit gedrag goed voelt?

Nadat we hadden vastgesteld dat milieuvriendelijk gedrag zelf positieve emoties oproept, wilden we ook inzicht krijgen in *waarom* dit het geval is. Als betekenis inderdaad een belangrijke rol speelt, zou gedrag dat als betekenisvoller gezien wordt ook meer positieve emoties moeten oproepen. In Studie 3.1 testten we deze redena-

tie door te kijken naar het effect dat verschillende indicatoren van betekenis hadden op een positieve associatie met milieuvriendelijk gedrag. Onze resultaten lieten zien dat zowel de betekenis van het gedrag zelf als de mate waarin gedrag persoonlijk betekenisvol is, invloed hadden op de emotionele associatie die mensen hebben met milieuvriendelijk gedrag. Hoe milieuvriendelijker mensen dachten dat gedrag was, en hoe belangrijker ze het milieu en milieuvriendelijk handelen vonden, hoe sterker de positieve associatie die mensen hadden met milieuvriendelijk gedrag.

Voortbouwend op deze bevindingen onderzochten we de rol van betekenis expliciet in Hoofdstuk 4. In twee scenariostudies en een veldstudie lieten we zien dat naarmate mensen dachten dat gedrag een grotere bijdrage leverde aan de milieukwaliteit, ze dit gedrag ook als betekenisvoller ervoeren. Verder bleek de betekenis die mensen aan het gedrag toekenden op haar beurt ook een positieve invloed te hebben op hoe goed ze zich verwachtten te voelen (Studie 4.1 en 4.2) en hoe goed ze zich daadwerkelijk voelden (Studie 4.3) over het doen van dit gedrag. Samen wijzen deze studies erop dat betekenis inderdaad een belangrijke verklaring kan zijn voor waarom milieuvriendelijk gedrag positieve emoties kan oproepen.

Kan de invloed die betekenisvol gedrag heeft op je zelfbeeld verklaren waarom het doen van dit gedrag goed voelt?

Als de betekenis die dit gedrag geeft een verklaring is voor waarom het doen van iets milieuvriendelijks goed voelt, roept dat ook een vervolgvraag op: waarom voelt betekenisvol gedrag goed? We beredeneerden in Hoofdstuk 2 dat het doen van iets betekenisvols goed kan voelen omdat dit gedrag iets positiefs kan zeggen over degene die dit gedrag vertoont. Mensen ontlenen het beeld dat ze van zichzelf hebben onder andere aan hun eigen gedrag (Bem, 1967; Bem, 1972). Milieuvriendelijk handelen kan er bijvoorbeeld voor zorgen dat mensen zichzelf zien als een milieuvriendelijk persoon (Cornelissen et al., 2008; Van der Werff et al., 2014b). Volgens dezelfde redenering kan “goed” gedrag, zoals het doen van iets milieuvriendelijks, een boost geven aan iemands zelfbeeld: het laat je zien dat je een goed persoon bent. Het hebben van zo’n positief zelfbeeld is volgens velen een belangrijke voorwaarde voor geluk (Baumeister, 1993; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Het positieve effect dat betekenisvol gedrag heeft op iemands zelfbeeld (een positief zelf-signaal) zou dus kunnen verklaren waarom het doen van dit gedrag een goed gevoel geeft. Gebaseerd op deze redenering verwachten we dat factoren die invloed hebben op *de mate waarin* milieuvriendelijk gedrag iets over jezelf zegt, ook invloed hebben op hoe goed mensen zich voelen over het doen van dit gedrag. In dit proefschrift hebben we naar één zo’n factor in het bijzonder gekeken: hoe vrijwillig de keuze voor het gedrag was.

Wij veronderstellen dat *vrijwillig kiezen* voor bepaald gedrag meer zegt over wie je bent dan het doen van ditzelfde gedrag omdat de situatie geen andere optie biedt,

bijvoorbeeld omdat de milieuvriendelijke variant het enig overgebleven product in het schap is. Iets betekenisvol doen omdat je dat zelf wil, zou daarom een sterker en positiever zelf-signaal moeten sturen dan het doen van hetzelfde gedrag omwille van de situatie. Studie 3.1 liet zien dat een positieve emotionele associatie met milieuvriendelijk gedrag inderdaad sterker was voor vrijwillig gekozen gedrag, dan voor gedrag dat gedaan werd omdat de situatie geen andere optie biedt. Hoe meer mensen de keuze voor milieuvriendelijk gedrag aan zichzelf kunnen toeschrijven, hoe sterker ze dit gedrag associëren met positieve emoties.

Hoofdstuk 5 bouwt voort op dit resultaat. Studie 5.1 liet zien dat het kopen van milieuvriendelijke producten inderdaad invloed heeft op hoe mensen zichzelf zien. Hoe meer milieuvriendelijke producten ze gekocht hadden, hoe meer mensen zichzelf zagen als een milieuvriendelijk persoon. Dit zelfbeeld had op zijn beurt invloed op hoe mensen zich over hun gedrag voelden: hoe milieuvriendelijker mensen zichzelf zagen, hoe beter ze zich voelden over hun aankopen. In overeenstemming met onze redenering illustreert Studie 5.2 verder dat mensen zichzelf ook algemeen als “beter” persoon zagen na het doen van iets milieuvriendelijks – een effect dat afhangt van in hoeverre dit gedrag iets over jezelf zegt. Mensen die zojuist hadden aangegeven hoe vaak ze vrijwillig iets milieuvriendelijks doen vonden dat dit gedrag sterker reflecteerde dat ze een goed persoon waren, dan mensen die zojuist hadden aangegeven hoe vaak ze iets milieuvriendelijks doen omwille van de situatie. Zoals verwacht was het ook deze keer het positieve zelfbeeld dat op zijn beurt invloed had op hoe mensen zich verwachtten te voelen over het doen van milieuvriendelijke gedragingen. Samen suggereren deze studies dat het doen van iets milieuvriendelijks iemands zelfbeeld een boost kan geven, en dat zorgt op zijn beurt er voor dat mensen zich goed voelen over het doen van dit gedrag.

Figuur 1.
Theoretisch
model
getoetst in dit
proefschrift



Theoretische implicaties en vervolgonderzoek

Onze bevinding dat milieuvriendelijk gedrag zelf een bron van geluk kan zijn omdat het betekenis geeft, levert een belangrijke bijdrage aan de literatuur die de relatie tussen milieuvriendelijk gedrag en geluk bestudeert. Tot nu toe werd de relatie tussen milieuvriendelijk gedrag en geluk vaak verklaard door te verwijzen naar factoren buiten het gedrag (Beavan, 2009; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; T. Jackson, 2005; Kasser, 2009). Wij beargumenteerden echter dat milieuvriendelijk gedrag *zelf* een goed gevoel kan geven. Omdat het positieve gevolgen heeft voor het milieu en toekomstige generaties kan dit gedrag als moreel en daarom betekenisvol gezien worden (Heberlein, 1972; Leopold, 1949; Thøgersen, 1996), waardoor het doen van dit gedrag goed voelt. Onze studies laten consistent zien dat de betekenis die mensen toeschrijven aan dit type gedrag een belangrijke reden is voor waarom milieuvriendelijk gedrag positieve emoties oproept en gelukkig kan maken. Hoe milieuvriendelijker en daardoor betekenisvoller het gedrag is, hoe beter mensen zich (verwachten te) voelen over het doen van dit gedrag. Verder laten onze studies zien dat het doen van iets betekenisvol goed kan voelen omdat het invloed heeft op iemands zelfbeeld. Hoe milieuvriendelijker gedrag is, hoe positiever dit gedrag op mensen afstraalt, en hoe beter ze zich er dus over voelen. Samen wijzen onze bevindingen erop dat niet alleen externe factoren kunnen verklaren waarom milieuvriendelijk gedrag en geluk gerelateerd zijn; milieuvriendelijk gedrag kan *zelf* ook een bron van geluk zijn. Door te laten zien dat betekenis een belangrijke rol speelt, voegen we een nieuwe en meer directe verklaring toe voor waarom milieuvriendelijk gedrag en geluk samen kunnen gaan.

Een tweede bijdrage van dit proefschrift is dat het illustreert dat welbehagen en betekenis met elkaar samenhangen. Uit onze studies blijkt dat milieuvriendelijk gedrag niet alleen positieve eudaimonische, maar ook hedonische emoties oproept, omdat dit gedrag als betekenisvol gezien wordt. Zoals sommigen redeneren wordt betekenisvol gedrag mogelijk zelfs behaaglijk en comfortabel gevonden juist *omdat* het betekenisvol is (zie ook Andreoni, 1989; Andreoni, 1990; Taufik et al., 2015). Toekomstig onderzoek moet uitwijzen of een dergelijke relatie tussen welbehagen en betekenis bestaat.

Onze bevinding dat milieuvriendelijk gedrag gelukkig kan maken omdat dit gedrag betekenis geeft, roept belangrijke vragen op voor vervolgonderzoek. Zo zou toekomstig onderzoek ons volledige model (zie Figuur 1) kunnen testen, en in meer detail bestuderen of het inderdaad de betekenis van gedrag is die ervoor zorgt dat het doen van dit gedrag een positief zelf-signaal oplevert. Daarnaast blijft het een belangrijke vraag hoe kenmerken van specifiek milieuvriendelijk gedrag – kenmerken die niet gerelateerd zijn aan de milieu impact van dit gedrag – gerelateerd zijn aan de con-

cepten in ons model. Omdat de gedragingen in onze studies niet bijzonder verve-
lend of moeilijk waren, kunnen we bijvoorbeeld niet concluderen dat de betekenis
die gedrag geeft zich altijd vertaalt in een goed gevoel, of dat deze relatie alleen
gefounden wordt als gedrag niet al te oncomfortabel is. Longitudinaal onderzoek
zou verder kunnen kijken naar de lange termijn effecten van het goede gevoel dat
milieuvriendelijk gedrag geeft. Worden mensen ook op de lange termijn gelukkiger
van milieuvriendelijk gedrag? En zorgt het goede gevoel dat milieuvriendelijk gedrag
geeft ervoor dat mensen meer of juist minder moreel gedrag vertonen op een later
moment?

Praktische implicaties

De resultaten van dit proefschrift bieden niet alleen nieuwe theoretische inzichten,
maar hebben ook verschillende praktische implicaties. Zoals de uitspraak “Over de
Amerikaanse manier van leven valt niet te onderhandelen” die voormalig president
George H.W. Bush deed voorafgaand aan de Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro laat
zien, geloven veel beleidsmakers nog steeds dat milieuvriendelijk gedrag betekent dat
mensen persoonlijke geluk moeten opofferen. Voortbouwend op eerdere bevindingen,
laten onze resultaten echter zien dat dit niet waar hoeft te zijn. Zoals dit proef-
schrift laat zien voelen mensen zich ook goed over het doen van iets milieuvrien-
delijks omdat dit gedrag gezien wordt als betekenisvol, juist omdat het goed voor het
milieu is. Als overheden op de lange termijn zowel de milieukwaliteit als persoonlijk
geluk willen vergroten, zou de focus tijdens het promoten van milieuvriendelijk
gedrag daarom niet alleen moeten liggen op het verminderen van mogelijk persoon-
lijk ongemak (L. Evans et al., 2013; Thøgersen, 2013). Dit proefschrift laat zien dat
er een waardevolle alternatieve richting bestaat: een focus op de persoonlijke- en
gedragsaspecten die milieuvriendelijk gedrag betekenisvoller maken.

Een eerste aspect waar men zich op kan richten, is via interventies duidelijker maken
wat de milieu impact is van verschillende gedragingen. Zoals onze resultaten laten
zien voelden mensen zich beter over gedrag naarmate ze het als milieuvriendelijker
zagen, omdat milieuvriendelijker gedrag als betekenisvoller werd ervaren. In het
dagelijks leven is het echter lang niet altijd evident hoe milieuvriendelijk specifiek
gedrag is. Als mensen niet weten dat hun gedrag milieuvriendelijk is, zien ze dit
gedrag ook als minder betekenisvol, waardoor het minder waarschijnlijk is dat dit
gedrag een goed gevoel oplevert. Duidelijke en betrouwbare informatie over de
milieu impact van gedrag is nodig om dit gebrek aan kennis weg te nemen, en kan
ervoor zorgen dat mensen die daadwerkelijk milieuvriendelijk handelen zich ook
goed voelen over het doen van dat gedrag.

Een tweede aspect waar men zich op kan richten, is hoe het doen van iets milieuvriendelijks afstraalt op degene die dit gedrag vertoont. Zoals onze resultaten laten zien voelden mensen zich beter over hetzelfde milieuvriendelijke gedrag naarmate het meer over hen zegt. Dit hoeft echter niet te betekenen dat alle overheidsinterventies die milieuvriendelijk gedrag stimuleren (en daarmee dus in meer of mindere mate ingrijpen in vrije keuze) afgezworen moeten worden. Tijdens het maken van beleid kan namelijk, naast de effectiviteit van de interventie zelf, ook de mate waarin mensen het gedrag aan zichzelf kunnen toeschrijven in overweging worden genomen. Het gebruik van ‘nudges’ is in dit geval een interessante casus. Sommige nudges stimuleren dat mensen een bewuste keuze maken voor het gewenste gedrag, zoals het op ooghoogte plaatsen van milieuvriendelijke producten. Andere nudges stimuleren echter een onbewuste keuze voor het gewenste gedrag, zoals kleinere borden die ervoor zorgen dat mensen minder eten. Bij deze tweede vorm van nudges zijn mensen zich niet bewust van hun gedragsverandering, laat staan dat ze hun keuze voor dit nieuwe gedrag zien als een die ze zelf hebben gemaakt. Het gebruik van de eerste vorm van nudges verdient, tenminste als het mede tot doel heeft een gedragskeuze iets te laten zeggen over de consument zelf, daarom de voorkeur.

Conclusie

Het doen van iets milieuvriendelijks kan soms duurder, moeilijker en oncomfortabeler zijn dan het laten van dit gedrag en daarom wordt milieuvriendelijk gedrag geassocieerd met het opofferen van geluk. Dit proefschrift laat echter zien dat dit niet per se het geval hoeft te zijn: het doen van iets milieuvriendelijks kan mensen ook een goed gevoel geven. Omdat milieuvriendelijk gedrag betekenisvol gevonden kan worden straalt het doen van dit gedrag positief af op wie je bent, vooral als je het doet omdat je dat zelf wil. Hoe betekenisvoller dit gedrag wordt gevonden, hoe “brighter the look on an environmentally-friendly life” dus is.

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